Yes. In the linguistic, legal, and covenantal contexts of the Old Testament periods through the first century C.E., the Hebrew verb *śānēʾ* ("hate") and its Greek counterpart *miseō* frequently function idiomatically in comparative statements to mean "love less," "prefer less," or "not choose/elect," rather than expressing personal emotional contempt, loathing, or active hostility. This is clear both from internal biblical usage and from broader ancient Near Eastern (ANE) and later Mediterranean patterns of speech.

Jacob, Leah, and Rachel (Genesis 29)

The narrative is explicit and self-interpreting. After Laban's deception, Genesis 29:30 states that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah." The very next verse (29:31) says: "When the Lord saw that Leah was *hated* [*śānēʾ*], he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren." The juxtaposition of "loved … more than" with "*hated*" shows that the latter simply marks the less-preferred wife.

Jacob did not abandon, mistreat, or treat Leah with contempt. He continued the marriage, fathered six sons and a daughter with her (including the ancestors of key tribes: Judah, Levi, and others), and the text never portrays him as despising her person. Leah's own naming of her sons (Reuben, Simeon, etc.) reflects her hope that her childbearing would lead Jacob to "love" her—i.e., to regard her with the fuller favor he showed Rachel. God's response is compassionate, not punitive: He opens Leah's womb precisely because she is the less-favored one.

This usage is confirmed by Israelite family law in Deuteronomy 21:15–17. The law addresses a man who has two wives, "one loved and the other *hated*" (*śānēʾ*), and protects the inheritance rights of the firstborn son of the "*hated*" wife. The legislation assumes the "*hated*" wife remains a legitimate wife with full legal standing; the term simply designates the less-favored or unpreferred wife in a polygamous household. Translators often render it "unloved" or "disliked" for clarity, recognizing the comparative sense.

Ancient audiences familiar with polygynous households would have understood the language as describing relative preference, not absolute emotional rejection or contempt.

God, Jacob, and Esau (Malachi 1:2–3; Romans 9:13)

Malachi 1:2–3 records the Lord saying, "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated." Paul quotes this in Romans 9:13 in the context of God's sovereign election of purpose. The same comparative idiom is at work.

In the Genesis narrative itself there is no portrayal of personal divine contempt for the individual Esau. God announces the election of the younger before the twins' birth (Genesis 25:23). Esau sells his birthright, receives a separate (if secondary) blessing, becomes the

father of a nation (Genesis 36), and later reconciles with Jacob (Genesis 33). The "hatred" in Malachi is national and covenantal: it contrasts God's electing love for the line of Jacob/Israel with the non-election (and subsequent historical judgments) of the line of Esau/Edom. The context in Malachi is Israel's post-exilic questioning of God's love; the prophet points to the contrast with Edom's desolation as evidence of Israel's privileged status. Deuteronomy 23:7 even commands Israel not to abhor an Edomite, "for he is your brother," underscoring that the language is not about personal or ethnic loathing.

The same pattern appears elsewhere: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other" (Matthew 6:24 / Luke 16:13); and Jesus' demand that a disciple "hate" father, mother, wife, children, and even his own life (Luke 14:26). Parallel wording in Matthew 10:37 ("loves father or mother more than me") makes the comparative force unmistakable. First-century Jewish and early Christian audiences understood this as hyperbolic preference language, not a command to feel literal hatred—consistent with the Fifth Commandment and with Jesus' own teaching on honor and love of neighbor.

Extra-Biblical and Cross-Cultural Evidence

Ancient Near Eastern covenant and treaty language. William L. Moran's foundational 1963 study demonstrated that in ANE suzerain-vassal treaties (Hittite, Neo-Assyrian, etc.), "love" is technical language for loyalty, faithful service, and exclusive allegiance to the overlord. The reciprocal demand is that the vassal "love" the suzerain "as himself" (e.g., Esarhaddon's succession treaties regarding Assurbanipal). The opposite—"hate"—denotes disloyalty, rebellion, or preference for another power. It is political and covenantal, not primarily emotional. Biblical covenant language (especially Deuteronomy's call to "love" YHWH) draws on this same register. God's "love" of Jacob and "hate" of Esau therefore fits the idiom of electing one party into covenant relationship and not electing the other.

In treaty stipulations one routinely finds language such as "with my friend you shall be friend, and with my enemy you shall be enemy." Choosing one alliance over another is expressed in the binary of loyalty versus rejection without implying personal loathing of the non-chosen party.

Family and social preference. Polygynous and hierarchical societies across the ANE regularly distinguished favored and less-favored wives or heirs. Legal protections for the rights of the less-favored (as in Deuteronomy 21) reflect broader cultural norms in which relative preference was acknowledged without dissolving the relationship or implying contemptuous rejection.

First-century Mediterranean understanding. The persistence of the idiom into the New Testament period (and its ready comprehension by Jesus' hearers and Paul's readers) shows continuity. Greek *miseō* can carry strong emotional force, but under Semitic influence and in comparative contexts it readily means "love less" or "not prefer." The Qumran community's language of "hating" the "sons of darkness" likewise functions as boundary language of

language of "hating" the "sons of darkness" likewise functions as boundary language of group preference and separation rather than purely private emotional animosity.

In short, both the Jacob–Leah/Rachel household narrative and the Jacob–Esau election language employ a well-attested ancient idiom of relative preference and covenantal choice. Ancient hearers from the patriarchal period through the first century C.E. would have recognized that "hatred" in these contrasts signaled lesser favor or non-election, not personal contempt. The relationships themselves—ongoing marriage and childbearing with Leah; the separate national existence and later reconciliation involving Esau—confirm that the language does not describe active loathing or rejection of the person.